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RESEARCH ARTICLE

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Strategic CSR-brand fit and customers' brand passion: Theoretical extension and analysis

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Abstract

Prior research in the brand management realm has broadly captured passion for a brand through brand-related factors. However, to the authors' knowledge, how the fit between a brand and its corporate social responsibility efforts (strategic CSR-brand fit) drive brand passion has been surprisingly ignored. Drawing on congruence theory, basic psychological needs theory, and social identity theory, we argue that strategic CSR-brand fit can significantly influence customers' sense of autonomy, competence, and relatedness, which in turn leads to brand passion. Furthermore, we hypothesize customer–company identification (CCI) as a key boundary condition for the indirect positive effect of strategic CSR-brand fit on brand passion through customers' satisfaction of psychological needs. Structural equation modeling results from a survey conducted with telecom customers (N = 1,059) supported a positive indirect effect of strategic CSR-brand fit on brand passion through the satisfaction of autonomy, competence, and relatedness needs. Moreover, the indirect effect was statistically significant through competence and relatedness needs satisfaction for customers with high CCI but it was not significant through competence satisfaction for customers with low CCI. CCI trivially facilitates brand passion formation through autonomy needs satisfaction. Implications of these findings for shaping brand passion among customers are discussed.

KEYWORDS

brand passion, customer–company identification, psychological needs satisfaction, strategic CSR-brand fit, telecom

1 | INTRODUCTION

The interest in the concept of passion has flourished in recent years among both marketing practitioners and academicians (Pourazad et al., 2019; Gilal et al., 2021). As such Vallerand et al. (2003) have introduced a dualistic model of passion (e.g., harmonious and obsessive) for valued activities. This dualistic perspective defines passion as a strong inclination toward a personally valued activity that one likes, considers self-defining, and to which significant amounts of time and energy are invested (Lavigne et al., 2014). Similarly, research in the marketing realm referred to brand passion as "a psychological construct comprised of excitation, infatuation, and obsession for a brand" (Albert et al., 2013, p. 905).

Both market research practitioners and academic marketing researchers have witnessed a growing interest in capturing customer brand passion (Pourazad et al., 2019). Therefore, research into a marketing realm has noted the importance of brand passion in strengthening positive word-of-mouth (Ahn, 2020; Herrando et al., 2017; Swimberghe et al., 2014), improving willingness-to-pay a price premium (Albert et al., 2013; Ghorbanzadeh et al., 2020),

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purchase intentions (Bauer et al., 2007), and brand evangelism (Swimberghe et al. 2014). Moreover, brand passion has been shown to make the strongest impact on enduring brand commitment (Das et al., 2019) and active customer loyalty (Hemsley-Brown & Alnawas, 2016; Pourazad et al., 2019). Despite this growing interest in brand passion research, however, an investigation into the antecedents is marginalized, and only a handful of researchers have focused on brand-related predictors consisting of brand uniqueness (Bauer et al., 2007), brand prestige (Ghorbanzadeh et al., 2020), brand experience (Das et al., 2019), and brand personality (Balon et al., 2013). Although these researchers have provided the initial insight into the antecedents of brand passion, the potential influence of customers' perception associated with a good corporate social responsibility (CSR)-brand fit on brand passion formation remains largely untapped (Apaydin et al., 2020; D'Acunto et al., 2020).

Strategic CSR-brand fit is a match between a firm's CSR activities of a brand and the image of a brand itself (Cha et al., 2016; Guzmán & Davis, 2017). For example, the Fair & Lovely (currently known as Glow & Lovely) campaign for providing scholarships to young girls to fulfill their dreams and the General Motors campaign for traffic safety is considered a good CSR-brand fit. Prior research guided by congruence theory has established that CSR-brand fit can drive a broad variety of consumers' behavioral responses when a firm's CSR programs have a good fit with the brand (Cha et al., 2016). As such, the increasing number of studies have shown that brands which managed to create a good CSR-brand fit may positively lead to improved purchase intention (Ashton & Scott, 2011; García-Jiménez et al., 2017) and customer's revisit intention (Ahn & Kwon, 2020). Moreover, research has suggested that cause-related CSR-fit can increase customer engagement (Chuah et al., 2020) and build brand equity by creating positive experiences (Guzmán & Davis, 2017; Sierra et al., 2017). Despite this growing importance of CSR-brand fit (Bigné et al., 2012; Cha et al., 2016), hitherto no research exists concerning the influence of strategic CSR-brand fit on brand passion. Thus, building on these ideas, our study is the first to address this gap in research by studying the link between strategic CSR-brand fit and brand passion.

Moreover, psychological research guided by basic psychological needs theory (BPNT) confirms the existence of three basic human needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness (known as A-C-R) and suggests that the satisfaction of these needs is not only conducive to but essential for flourishing and wellbeing (Gilal, Zhang, Paul, et al., 2019; Vansteenkiste et al., 2020). Autonomy needs satisfaction reflects an individual's desire to experience freedom of choice (Qian et al., 2020). The need for competence represents an individual's inherent desire for mastering a task and manage various challenges (Vansteenkiste et al., 2020). The need for relatedness reflects an individual's desire to experience a sense of community, feel connected, and cared for by others (Gilal, Zhang, Paul, et al., 2019). BPNT posits that consumer behavior can be influenced by satisfying the basic needs of A-C-R. As such, researchers in the marketing realm has shown that marketing environment such as product design (Gilal et al., 2018), integrated resort experience (Ahn, Back, & Choe, 2019), positive word-of-mouth messages (Sweeney et al., 2014), and celebrity endorsers influence (Gilal et al., 2020) can significantly support customers' A-C-R needs satisfaction. Consumer research has further shown that brands that managed to satisfying consumer basic needs for A-C-R can undoubtedly increase brand attachment (Thomson, 2006) and brand advocacy (Jillapalli & Wilcox, 2010). Moreover, the satisfaction of needs for A-C-R may enhance customers' participation in brand co-creation (Hsieh & Chang, 2016), increase energy-saving (Sweeney et al., 2014) and e-waste disposal behaviors (Gilal, Zhang, Gilal, et al., 2019). Building on these antecedents and consequences, it seems more promising to examine whether customers' need for A-C-R contributes to facilitating the link between strategic CSR-brand fit and brand passion. Therefore, we aim to derive insights from BPNT to examine the influence of CSR-brand fit on brand passion through the mediational effect of A-C-R needs satisfaction.

In addition to studying the mediational effect of three needs, we also examine the boundary condition of brand passion formation by studying the moderating effect of customer–company identification (CCI) into the relationship between strategic CSR-brand fit and psychological needs satisfaction through the lens of social identity theory (SIT). Prior studies guided by SIT suggest that customers will more likely to be identified with those firms which help them build their social identities (Hur & Kim, 2020; Lafferty et al., 2016; Pérez & Rodríguez del Bosque, 2013) and the firm's CSR initiative is the one important way which contributes largely to building CCI (Yang et al., 2019). Swimberghe and Wooldridge (2014); noted that high CCI can satisfy customers' belongingness needs and strengthened active brand loyalty through the firm's CSR efforts. Despite the above advances in knowledge of the meditational effect of CCI, the literature does not look at the moderating effect of CCI in brand passion formation. Thus, in line with this literature gap identified above, it seems viable to address whether CCI contributes to enhance or undermine the brand passion formation through the satisfaction of customers' A-C-R needs. Therefore, our study is the first to extend this underexplored line of inquiry by studying the moderating effect of CCI on brand passion formation.

In summary, this study contributes to theory and research on CSR and brand passion in several ways. First, we extend prior psychological research on passion into the marketing and branding context and offer news insights by investigating the relationship between strategic CSR-brand fit and brand passion. Consequently, by doing so, we propose a positive indirect path between strategic CSR-brand fit and brand passion and provide a framework to explain "how" a good CSR-brand fit of a firm affected their customers' passion towards the brand. Second, we explain "why" this positive path occurs by examining the psychological mechanism, the satisfaction of customers' psychological needs that are activated by the good CSR-brand fit, and CCI. By studying the satisfaction of customers' psychological needs and integrating it into a model that explains brand passion formation, we not only respond to calls for the investigation of the psychological mechanism of shaping brand passion (Gilal et al., 2020) but also inform existing research in CSR by explicating

the psychological process that connects the strategic CSR-brand fit to the behavioral outcome of brand passion. Third, in addition to addressing not only "why" behind the positive path of strategic CSR-brand fit on brand passion, but, we also identify boundary conditions that determine "when" it will happen; that is, CCI. We examine a moderating effect of CCI to determine "when" it will be more capable of increasing brand passion among customers.

2 | HYPOTHESES DEVELOPMENT

2.1 | Strategic CSR-brand fit and autonomy needs satisfaction

One of the most important issues in the field of brand management is the effectiveness and outcomes of the firm's CSR efforts. Prior studies have pointed to directions for CSR-fit research (Becker-Olsen et al., 2006; Seok Sohn et al., 2012). For instance, Cha et al. (2016) revealed a significant role of perceived fit between CSR activities of a brand and the image of a brand itself. Strategic CSR-brand fit is the consistency and or the good match between a brand's CSR activities and customers' perceptions and expectations related to the brand image (Apaydin et al., 2020). CSR-brand fit is considered high when the brand and the social cause that the brand supports through its CSR programs, share a similar value (Guzmán & Davis, 2017). For example, General Motors' campaign for traffic safety and Glow and Lovely campaign for providing scholarships to young girls to fulfill their dreams is considered a good CSR-brand fit.

The fit between a brand and its CSR efforts drive consumers brand-related outcomes such as positive attitude towards co-branding (Singh, 2016), service brand loyalty (Cha et al., 2016), brand equity (Guzmán & Davis, 2017; Sierra et al., 2017), improved purchase intention for a brand (Ashton & Scott, 2011; García-Jiménez et al., 2017), and increase customer engagement behavior (Chuah et al., 2020). This line of research is consistent with the tenet of congruence theory which suggests that customers will perceive a brand to be more credible when a firm's CSR programs have a good fit with its brand (Ashton & Scott, 2011; Cha et al., 2016; Chuah et al., 2020; Guzmán & Davis, 2017). This evidence raises the question of whether CSR-brand fit is capable of creating brand passion among customers? If a firm's CSR-brand fit affects a customer's brand passion, it is important to understand the psychological mechanism which facilitates this brand passion formation process. One potential psychological variable is customers' autonomy needs satisfaction. Autonomy needs satisfaction which is, customers' inherent desire to experience the freedom of choice, can be satisfied when the brand's CSR programs encourage customers to engage in an activity that expresses their true identities, that in turn, can produce customers' confidence and stronger feelings of autonomy (Kim & Lee, 2020). For instance, customers exhibit a high level of autonomy when a company offers a variety of CSR options that provide a sense of personal choice will significantly increase satisfaction with customers' autonomy. Gilal et al. (2020) in the CSR literature also suggested that empowering customers to determine participation in CSR programs can positively improve satisfaction with customers' autonomy. In line with this, the authors hypothesized that customers perception associated with the strategic fit between CSR activities of a brand and the image of a brand can enhance customers' sense of personal choice and feelings of autonomy by empowering and offering them meaningful and flexible choices to determine participation in firms' CSR-related activities. Building on the aforementioned arguments and relying on a tenet of congruence theory, we expect that a good fit between a firm's CSR programs and its brand image (e.g., CSR-brand fit) can significantly fuel customers' sense of autonomy. Thus, we predict:

H1: *Strategic CSR-brand fit relates positively to customers' autonomy needs satisfaction.*

2.2 | Strategic CSR-brand fit and competence needs satisfaction

Another psychological variable that could potentially facilitate the influence of CSR-brand fit on customer's brand passion, is customer's competence needs satisfaction. Competence needs satisfaction, which is an individual's inherent desire for mastery, is influenced by the marketing environment such as company-generated content, sales promotion, above-the-line, and below-the-line marketing messages (Gilal, Zhang, Paul, et al., 2019). Although the effect of CSR-brand fit on customer's brand passion has not been studied before, Gilal et al. (2018) study the effect of brand design on the competence needs satisfaction and conclude that the more brand design protects, maintains, and enhances customers' confidence, the more they satisfied with the needs for competence. Gilal et al. (2018) further suggested that customers often prefer the functional and esthetically pleasing design of a brand to reassure satisfaction of their needs for competence. Ahn (2020) argues that harmonious passion leads to higher competence needs satisfaction that leads to positive word-of-mouth intention in the integrated resort setting. Bitrián et al. (2020) reveal that achievement-related elements and immersion-related elements lead to satisfaction with customers' competence needs in gamified sports apps setting. In the current study, CSR-brand fit is considered as an antecedent of a customer's brand passion through increasing competence satisfaction. Satisfaction with customer's competence needs can be achieved when customers participate in a certain CSR-brand fit-related activity which helps them feel competent and capable of performing well (Gilal et al., 2020). These CSR-brand fit-related experiences provided by firms can significantly increase the satisfaction of customers' competence needs (Ahn & Kwon, 2020). Building on these grounds, because the satisfaction of competence needs is associated with effective enacted experiences and better consumer behavior outcomes (Thomson, 2006) and CSR-brand fit has a stronger effect on service brand loyalty (Cha et al., 2016), brand equity (Guzmán & Davis, 2017), it is, therefore,

argued that strategic CSR-brand fit will be considered more prominent in enhancing customers' sense of competence. Formally stated:

H2: *Strategic CSR-brand fit relates positively to customers' competence needs satisfaction.*

2.3 | Strategic CSR-brand fit and relatedness needs satisfaction

The third hypothesis addresses the relationship between strategic CSR-brand fit and customers' relatedness needs satisfaction. As described by congruence theory, the fit between CSR and a brand has been shown to influence various consumer behavior outcomes including purchase intention, service brand loyalty, brand equity, and customer engagement (Ashton & Scott, 2011; Cha et al., 2016; Chuah et al., 2020; Guzmán & Davis, 2017). This raises the question of whether CSR-brand fit-related experiences provided by firms could also be capable of increasing the satisfaction of customers' relatedness needs? Although the effect of CSR-brand fit on customers' relatedness needs satisfaction has not been examined before, the recent research by Wang and Li (2016, 2017) suggest that relatedness needs satisfaction, which is an individual's inherent desire to feel connected, respected, and cared for by others, is influenced by firm's marketing efforts. In line with this, Gilal et al. (2020) suggest that customers engage in sustainable behavior when they feel connected to or valued by firms. It is expected that good CSR-brand fit-related experiences provided by firms can allow customers to experience social belongingness, which in turn, satisfy their relatedness needs. This view is supported in Ahn and Kwon's (2020) research which suggests that satisfaction with relatedness to CSR activities is associated with constant communication between the company and its customers. In the same vein, Gilal et al. (2020) show that social influencing factors such as celebrity attractiveness and celebrity expertise can lead to higher relatedness needs satisfaction that leads to a stronger brand passion among air travelers. Building on these rationals, it is expected that because relatedness needs satisfaction is strongly associated with consumer behavior (Bitrián et al., 2020; Gilal et al., 2020; Wang & Li, 2016, 2017) and CSR-brand fit is considered prominent in enhancing brand loyalty and purchase intention (Ashton & Scott, 2011; Cha et al., 2016; Lee et al., 2019), it is, therefore, expected that CSR-brand fit will be considered more prominent in increasing customers' sense of relatedness (as the CSR efforts have community elements). We, thus, posit that a good fit between a firm's CSR programs and its brand image (e.g., CSR-brand fit) will not only enhance customers' inherent desire to feel connected and instill a sense of relatedness but also allow customers to express themselves with the help of brand. Thus, we predict:

H3: *Strategic CSR-brand fit relates positively to customers' relatedness needs satisfaction.*

2.4 | Autonomy needs satisfaction and brand passion

As mentioned at the outset, BPNT is one of the most prominent theories of marketing which identified customers' needs for A-C-R as basic psychological needs (Gilal, Zhang, Paul, et al., 2019) which suggests that the satisfaction of these needs is not only conducive but also essential for flourishing and wellbeing (Vansteenkiste et al., 2020). The BPNT researchers assert that customers' behavior is shaped by the satisfaction of A-C-R (Gilal et al., 2018) and when these needs are supported, they account for a broad variety of positive outcomes (Jillapalli & Wilcox, 2010; Vansteenkiste et al., 2020).

Ahn, Back, & Choe (2019) define autonomy needs satisfaction as a customers' inherent desire to experience a volition and sense of choice when engaging in an activity. Customers exhibit a high level of autonomy when the firm's CSR programs allow them to behave in their own ways and help them to pursue activities of their own volition (Gilal et al., 2020). In the present study's setting, satisfaction with customer's autonomy can be achieved when telecom service operators provide a variety of choices (e.g., day, night, weekly, monthly internet, calls, and short message service [SMS] packages that customers can choose based on their preferences) to promote customers' autonomy and their desire to experience a sense of choice. Likewise, customers exhibit a high level of autonomy when firms empower them to choose CSR programs that customers want to support. Consumer research guided by BPNT suggests that customer autonomy needs satisfaction is strongly associated with consumers' behavioral responses. For instance, research has established that brands that satisfy customers' autonomy needs can increase brand attachment (Ahn & Back, 2019; Ilicic et al., 2016; Thomson, 2006), brand advocacy (Jillapalli & Wilcox, 2010), and it may also improve customers' willingness-to-pay (Gilal et al., 2018), and customer engagement in cocreation (Hsieh & Chang, 2016). Moreover, the satisfaction of customers' autonomy needs is associated with their desire to save energy (Sweeney et al., 2014) and disposal of e-waste (Gilal, Zhang, Gilal et al., 2019). Consistent with these rationales and the theoretical lens of BPNT, it seems viable in the present settings that brand passion among consumers is likely to be strengthened when the firm's CSR-brand fit programs allow customers to express their individuality and allowing them to pursue activities of their own choice (e.g., autonomy satisfaction or need for independence). Thus, it is expected that the satisfaction of autonomy from the firm's CSR-brand fit activities will generate more positive customers' emotional responses, including brand passion. We anticipate the following:

H4: *Autonomy needs satisfaction positively increases brand passion among customers.*

2.5 | Competence needs satisfaction and brand passion

Competence needs satisfaction is defined as customers' inherent desire for mastery or to feel effective in performing and achieving

valued outcomes (Ahn, Back, & Choe, 2019; Bitrián et al. (2020). What customers do and how they behave when their competence need is supported by firms' marketing programs? Marketing research is divided in terms of the effect of competence needs satisfaction on consumers' behavioral responses. Thomson (2006) suggests when customers feel competence needs satisfaction, they are not likely to have positive outcomes, such as attachment to celebrity. Specifically, Thomson (2006) argues that the fulfillment of competence needs leads to a trivial attachment to celebrity. In a similar vein, Ahn (2020) suggests that harmonious passion leads to higher competence needs satisfaction that leads to unfavorable revisit intention in an integrated resort context. Bitrián et al. (2020) argue that achievement and immersion-related elements lead to satisfaction of competence needs that trivially leads to autonomous motivation in gamified sports' apps setting. Conversely, Ahn (2020) shows that customers' need for competence can sometimes lead to greater positive word-of-mouth intention: when a competence needs satisfaction is activated by obsessive passion, it can lead customers to recommend the firm and its offerings and/or marketing programs (e.g., brands) more favorably. Competence needs satisfaction explains when firms are responsive to their customers' innate needs of competence, customers form strong attachments to the brand (Ahn & Back, 2019). Furthermore, if customers trust a brand, then this competence satisfaction relationship will result in a customers' more favorable response such as the willingness to advocate the brands (Jillapalli & Wilcox, 2010).

In the present study's setting, customers exhibit a high level of competence when the firm's CSR programs allow them to perform well and achieve valued outcomes (Gilal et al., 2020). In particular, telecom service providers can promote a sense of competence among customers by encouraging them to participant in those CSR activities which enable them to attain not only community/environmental goals (e.g., saving energy by switching off lights) but also attain their personal goals (e.g., low electricity bills, etc). Building on these rationales, the authors hypothesized that brand passion among customers is likely to be strengthened when telecom service providers' CSR-brand fit programs help customers feel competent and capable of performing well (e.g., competence satisfaction or need for achievement). Hence, we rely on the BPNT tenet to argue that competence needs satisfaction should significantly boost brand passion among customers. Thus, we anticipate the following:

H5: *Competence needs satisfaction positively increases brand passion among customers.*

2.6 | Relatedness needs satisfaction and brand passion

Wang and Li (2017) and Thomson (2006) define relatedness needs satisfaction as a customers' inherent desire to feel connected to others and to avoid feeling isolated. Customers' needs for relatedness will likely be satisfied when the brand and its marketing programs provide customers with opportunities to easily connect and communicate with others. For instance, in the current study's context, customers satisfy with the needs for relatedness when telecom service operators help customers connect with their family, friends, and loved ones by providing high-speed internet, free airtime (both countrywide and internationally). Telecom service operators may also promote customers' feelings of belongingness and connectedness with others by providing free tickets for concerts for entertaining and socializing experiences. Marketing studies under the theoretical lens of BPNT suggest that customers' satisfaction with needs for relatedness is associated with a broad variety of favorable responses. For instance, research by Thomson (2006) in the human brand's context suggests that the customer's satisfaction with the needs for relatedness leads to a stronger attachment with celebrity. Hsieh and Chang (2016) in the automobile setting establish that brands that satisfy customers' relatedness needs can facilitate the establishment of brand cocreation engagement. Wang and Li (2017) in social networking sites argue that the fulfillment relatedness needs positively motivates customers to produce user-generated content. Ahn (2020) in the integrated resort setting demonstrates that relatedness needs satisfaction can sometimes lead to greater positive attachment with an integrated resort brand. Recent research by Gilal et al. (2020) suggests that air travelers are more likely to form a passion for an airline brand when it enhances the feelings of relatedness among air travelers. Combined with the viewpoint of these prior studies, it seems reasonable in the present settings to expect that passion for the brand is likely to be activated among customers when the telecom service operator brand truly cares about them, provides feelings of intimacy, and promotes customers' independence by providing the relatedness-supportive environment. Building on these rationales and theoretical tenet of BPNT, we argue that customers' relatedness needs satisfaction should significantly increase brand passion among consumers. Thus, we anticipate the following:

H6: *Relatedness needs satisfaction positively increases brand passion among customers.*

2.7 | Moderating effect of customer-company identification

Yang et al. (2019, p. 4) define CCI as "a customer's psychological state and the belongingness to a certain firm." Researchers agree that customers will more likely be identified with the company when the firm's identity is attractive (Swimberghe & Wooldridge, 2014). This perspective is in line with SIT which suggests that customers are more likely to be identified with a company that helps them build social identity (Turner & Tajfel, 1986). Empirical research relying on SIT also indicated that CSR efforts may contribute extensively to the CCI process (Yang et al., 2019). A study by Swimberghe and Wooldridge (2014) examines the mediating effect of CCI and suggested that CSR associations can enhance customer loyalty when the

relatedness need is satisfied through the high CCI process. This finding is validated by Cha et al. (2016) research, which revealed that service brand loyalty affected by a firm's CSR initiatives through identification is stronger when customers are autonomously motivated to participate in the firm's CSR activities. Overall, these results pointed to directions for the possible moderating effect of CCI. Relying on these findings and SIT, we predict that customers' sense of A-C-R needs are better captured by strategic CSR-brand fit when customers are strongly identified with a company (e.g., high CCI). Therefore, we predict:

H7: *Customer–company identification moderates the effect of strategic CSR-brand fit on customers' (a) autonomy, (b) competence, and (c) relatedness needs satisfaction*

2.8 | A conceptual framework

Replying on three theoretical lenses- CT, BPNT, and SIT, the present study analyzes the effects of strategic CSR-brand fit on customers' A-C-R needs satisfaction and subsequent brand passion. We also study CCI as a key boundary condition in the brand passion formation process (see Figure 1).

3 | RESEARCH DESIGN

3.1 | Context of the study

We tested our hypothesized model by using data from telecom customers. Our rationale for choosing customers from the telecom industry is that Pakistan's telecommunications sector is the world's third-fastest growing telecommunications market and it is considered a key driver for the growth of Pakistan's economy (Pakistan Telecommunication Authority [PTA], 2017). According to the recent report by PTA (2019), approximately 90% of the population has mobile phone coverage with more than 166.47 million active mobile phone subscribers in January 2020 which accounted for a total of Pakistani Rupees (PKR) 552 billion revenues in the fiscal year 2018–19. Likewise, according to PTA (2019), Pakistan has the highest mobile broadband penetration (e.g., 35.21%) with 76.3 million broadband subscribers, and there are over 1,309 million annual mobile banking transactions (3.6 million daily transactions) with an annual volume of over PKR 4.5 trillion in 2019, making Pakistan the third-highest revenue-generated country from telecom sector in the world in 2019. Building on these arguments, it is important to have a full-fledged framework that may help telecom practitioners to effectively design marketing strategies for developing a passion for telecom brands.

3.2 | Procedure

Consistent with prior studies in marketing (Cha et al., 2016; Singh, 2016), we used a scenario-based experimental design to test the hypothesized framework. Four scenarios were designed with industry experts from the telecom service operators and with feedback from the pilot study of mobile telecom customers. The selected scenarios represent four brands from four different telecom companies (e.g., Jazz, Zong, Ufone, and Telenor) operating in Pakistan.

By using a convenience sampling method, we recruited participants from Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Sindh, and Punjab. The respondents were invited from these areas because these three provinces represent northern (e.g., people from Pakhtunkhwa region), southern (e.g., people from Sindh region), and eastern (e.g., peoples originating from the Punjab region) Pakistan, respectively, reducing regional and subcultural differences. Participants were recruited from these areas using several methods. First, young adults were approached in major cities of Sindh and Punjab at shopping centers and other public places from October 2019 to November 2019. Second, students were approached in Pakistani universities and their subcampuses located in three major cities of Sindh and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa in November 2019. Third, based on the snowball sampling technique, an online survey was developed using Google form, and we randomly disseminated the link to the survey on different social media platforms including Whatsapp. The instructions presented in the survey requested participants to help researchers forward the survey link to his/her family, friends, and colleagues to participate in this study.

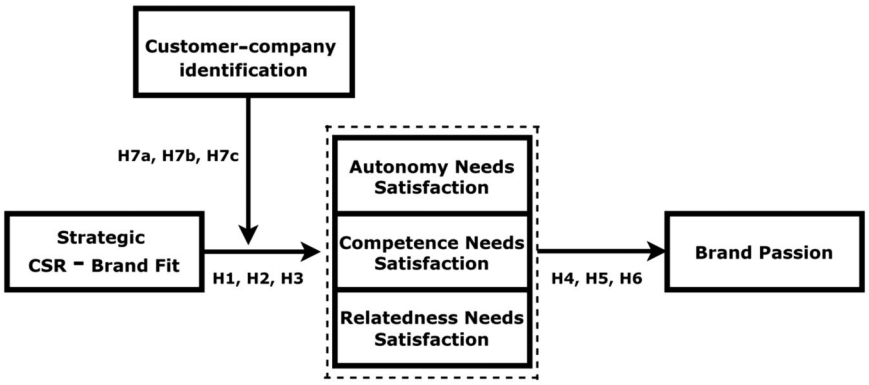


FIGURE 1 Conceptual framework

All subjects were randomly exposed to one of the four scenarios and they were given 5–8 min to ponder on the scenario. After reading the scenario, the participants were requested to fill out a survey that mapped into the dependent (e.g., brand passion), independent (e.g., strategic CSR-brand fit), mediating (e.g., A-C-R needs satisfaction), moderating (e.g., CCI), and demographic (e.g., age, gender, marital status, occupation, and monthly income) variables.

3.3 | Participants

After the elimination of the unqualified data, 1,059 recovered surveys were used for the data analysis, leaving the effective recovery rate of 85.89%. Of the initial cohort of 1,059 samples, 62.3% (660) were male respondents and 37.7% (399) were female. 54.2% (574) of the participants were 25- to 34-years old and 54.6% (578) were unmarried. Moreover, Table 1 further indicates that 39.3% (416) had a monthly income of between PKR 51,000 and 80,000, and 68.3% (723) had a job in different sectors in Pakistan.

3.4 | Measurement

Consistent with prior studies in marketing (Paul, 2018; Viglia et al., 2016), all the measurement items were drawn from well-established scales from extant research, and we slightly revised the questions to suit the objective of the present study. Answers were coded from 1 = *fully disagree* to 5 = *fully agree* to measure all indicators. The five-item scale (including one reverse-coded item) implemented by Gilal et al. (2020) and Swimberghe et al. (2014) was adapted to assess consumers' passion for the telecom brand. Strategic CSR-brand fit was measured with four items (two reverse-coded items were added to reduce acquiescence bias) derived from Becker-Olsen et al. (2006) and Cha et al. (2016). Customers' needs for the satisfaction of A-C-R were measured using 12 items (one reverse-coded item for each need satisfaction) developed by Ahn, Back, and Choe (2019). Five items (including one reverse-coded item) for assessing CCI were borrowed from Swimberghe and Wooldridge (2014). The internal reliability (Cronbach's α) for consumer brand passion ($\alpha = 0.975$), strategic CSR-brand fit ($\alpha = 0.964$), customers' needs satisfaction for autonomy ($\alpha = 0.910$), competence ($\alpha = 0.903$), relatedness ($\alpha = 0.956$), and CCI ($\alpha = 0.980$) was higher than the recommended benchmark of 0.70 (Field, 2013; Pallant, 2013). Finally, the scores on negatively worded items were subsequently reworded into a direct positive mode, as inspired by Roszkowski and Soven (2010).

3.5 | Common method bias

Because the data for measuring dependent (i.e., customers' brand passion) and independent (i.e., strategic CSR-brand fit), mediating (i.e., the satisfaction of A-C-R needs), and moderating (i.e., CCI) were obtained from the same respondents using the same method, there is a risk of potential common method variance. Therefore, we employed Harman's single-factor to test potential common variance (Jordan & Troth, 2020). Our findings suggest that the single factor explains 38.69% of the total variance which is significantly less than 50%, demonstrating that all positive relationships proposed in the SEM will not be driven by an unobserved common factor.

4 | DATA ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

4.1 | Exploratory factor analysis

Before, examining the structural influence of CSR-brand fit on psychological needs satisfaction, and subsequent consumer brand passion, exploratory factor analysis (EFA) was employed using principal axis factor to determine the underlying factors structure of the variables. EFA results presented in Table 2 revealed a solution with six distinct factors (e.g., brand passion = 17.333%, strategic

TABLE 1 Profile of respondents

Items	*n*	(%)
Gender		
Male	660	62.3
Female	399	37.7
Age (years)		
16–24	298	28.1
25–34	574	54.2
35–55	122	11.5
55+	65	6.1
Monthly income (PKR)		
<20 k	91	8.6
20–50 k	213	20.1
51–80 k	416	39.3
81–110 k	139	13.1
111–140 k	112	10.6
>140 k	88	8.3
Marital status		
Single	578	54.6
Married	481	45.4
Occupation		
Student	152	14.4
Employed	723	68.3
Self-employed/own business	184	17.4

Note: Sample size = 1,059.
Abbreviation: PKR, Pakistani Rupees.

CSR-brand fit = 16.693%, customers' needs for autonomy = 12.588%, competence = 12.468%, relatedness = 16.873%, and CCI = 13.955%) which jointly explained approximately 89.91% of the total variances. However, one badly loaded item of brand passion (e.g., BP-5), autonomy needs satisfaction (ANS-1), competence needs satisfaction (e.g., CNS-3), and two badly loaded items of CCI (e.g., CCI-1, CCI-5) were omitted because of insignificant factor loadings (i.e., <0.30) and lower communalities (i.e., <0.60) as recommended by Field (2013) and Pallant (2013). Moreover, Bartlett's test (Bartlett = 29910.275; $df = 210$: $p < 0.001$) and Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin test (K-M-O = 0.900) significantly higher than the recommended benchmark of 0.60, suggesting the adequate fit of the six-factors model (Field, 2013; Pallant, 2013).

4.2 | Confirmatory factor analysis

Next, the confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was employed with the original scale to see whether scale items reliably reflected the hypothesized latent variables. The original scales (e.g., brand passion = 5 items, CSR-brand fit = 4 items, customers' needs for autonomy = 4 items, competence = 4 items, relatedness = 4 items, and CCI = 5 items), which consisted of 26 items, revealed poorer fit indices: $\chi^2/df = 16.981$, CFI = 0.850, NFI = 0.842, TLI = 0.828, GFI = 0.703, SRMR = 0.145, RMSEA = 0.123, PCLOSE = 0.000. However, after eliminating five badly loaded items (e.g., BP-5 = 0.036, ANS-1 = −0.002, CNS-3 = −0.088, CCI-1 = 0.077, and CCI-5 = 0.029), the CFA revealed good fit indices, $\chi^2/df = 3.16$, CFI = 0.988, NFI = 0.982, TLI = 0.985, GFI = 0.955, SRMR = 0.036, RMSEA = 0.045, PCLOSE = 661.70. These CFA results mirror EFA findings obtained earlier and suggest that the six-factors model with 21 items should be preferred.

4.3 | Convergent validity

CFA was employed using AMOS to test the convergent validity by examining factor loadings (FL), composite reliability (CR), and, average variance extracted (AVE). Our results presented in Table 2

TABLE 2 Summary of measurement and factor loadings for indicator reliability

Variable	Item	Factor loadings (EFA)	Factor loadings (CFA)	Variance explained	Composite reliability	Average variance extracted
Brand passion	BP1	0.870	0.917	17.333	0.971	0.894
	BP2	0.866	0.965			
	BP3	0.877	0.919			
	BP4	0.876	0.980			
Strategic CSR-brand fit	SCBF1	0.840	0.965	16.693	0.957	0.848
	SCBF2	0.845	0.966			
	SCBF3	0.856	0.880			
	SCBF4	0.841	0.870			
Autonomy needs satisfaction	ANS2	0.859	0.834	12.588	0.912	0.777
	ANS3	0.894	0.947			
	ANS4	0.869	0.859			
Competence needs satisfaction	CNS1	0.854	0.814	12.468	0.907	0.765
	CNS2	0.897	0.959			
	CNS4	0.873	0.844			
Relatedness needs satisfaction	RNS1	0.812	0.875	16.873	0.956	0.846
	RNS2	0.857	0.944			
	RNS3	0.849	0.918			
	RNS4	0.857	0.940			
Customer–company identification	CCI2	0.919	0.991	13.955	0.980	0.970
	CCI3	0.918	0.979			
	CCI4	0.917	0.985			

Note: K-M-O = 0.900; Bartlett's test of sphericity = 29910.275; $df = 210$ ($p < 0.001$).

Abbreviations: CFA, confirmatory factor analysis; CSR, corporate social responsibility; *df*, degree of freedom; EFA, exploratory factor analysis; K-M-O, Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin test.

indicate that CR (i.e., ranged from 0.907 to 0.980), AVE (i.e., ranged from 0.765 to 0.970), and all items FL (ranged from 0.814 to 0.991) well above the recommended benchmark of 0.70, 0.50, and 0.70 respectively (Byrne, 2001), confirming the convergent validity of the measurement instruments.

4.4 | Discriminant validity

Fornell and Larcker's (1981) recommendation was used to assess the discriminant validity of the measurement instrument. The results presented in Table 3 reveal that the square root of AVE for each variable was greater than the corresponding square of the correlations, thus, indicating that discriminant validity is satisfied (Field, 2013; Pallant, 2013).

4.5 | Alternative model comparison

Following the recommendations of Paul (2015, 2019), further analysis was conducted to ascertain the discriminant validity. We compared the model (a) (i.e., brand passion, strategic CSR-brand fit, autonomy needs satisfaction, competence needs satisfaction, relatedness needs satisfaction, and CCI), with a model (b) (i.e., brand passion/strategic CSR-brand fit, autonomy needs satisfaction, competence needs satisfaction, relatedness needs satisfaction, and CCI), with a model (c) (i.e., brand passion/strategic CSR-brand fit, autonomy needs satisfaction, competence needs satisfaction, and relatedness needs satisfaction/CCI), with a model (d) (i.e., brand passion/strategic CSR-brand fit/autonomy needs satisfaction, competence needs satisfaction, and relatedness needs satisfaction/CCI), with a model (e) (i.e., brand passion/strategic CSR-brand fit/autonomy needs satisfaction and competence needs satisfaction/relatedness needs satisfaction/CCI), and with a model (f) (all variables loaded together on the single factor). The results, as shown in Table 4, demonstrate that the model (a) excellently fits the data, supporting the independence constructs (Field, 2013; Pallant, 2013).

4.6 | Structural equation modeling (SEM) results

SEM was conducted to examine the proposed direct relationships among variables. The SEM was performed in AMOS (Byrne, 2001) with the maximum likelihood method. The SEM comprising brand passion, strategic CSR-brand fit, customers' A-C-R revealed an excellent fit: $\chi^2/df = 1.942$, CFI = 0.998, NFI = 0.995, TLI = 0.994, GFI = 0.997, SRMR = 0.033, RMSEA = 0.030, PCLOSE = 0.835. Table 5 presents detail SEM estimation. As expected, CSR-brand fit significantly satisfies consumers autonomy (H1: $\beta = 0.401$, $t = 14.241^{***}$), competence, (H2: $\beta = 0.400$, $t = 14.186^{***}$), and relatdeness (H3: $\beta = 0.635$, $t = 26.752^{***}$), hence, confirming H1–H3. Similarly, the satisfaction of autonomy (H4: $\beta = 0.339$, $t = 14.149^{***}$), competence (H5: $\beta = 0.214$, $t = 8.933^{***}$), and relatedness needs (H6: $\beta = 0.384$, $t = 15.722^{***}$) significantly drives consumers brand passion, providing support for H4–H6.

4.7 | The mediational effect of A-C-R needs satisfaction

The mediational impact of customers' A-C-R needs satisfaction was then examined. First, we tested the direct path from strategic CSR-brand fit to brand passion after elimination of customers' A-C-R needs satisfaction and results suggest that the additional path (CSR-brand fit → brand passion) is significant ($\beta = 0.488$, $t = 18.164^{***}$). When including customers' A-C-R needs satisfaction in the model the direct path from CSR-brand fit to brand passion was insignificant ($\beta = 0.051$, $t = 0.122$ *NS*), thereby indicating full mediation from the intermediate variables in the model. Thus, suggesting that customers' A-C-R needs satisfaction has an explanatory relevance in the relationship between CSR-brand fit and brand passion.

TABLE 3 The discriminant validity index

Variables	BP	SCBF	ANS	CNS	RNS	CCI
Brand passion (BP)	**0.946**[a]					
Strategic CSR-brand fit (SCBF)	0.489[b]	**0.921**[a]				
Autonomy needs satisfaction (ANS)	0.406[b]	0.410[b]	**0.881**[a]			
Competence needs satisfaction (CNS)	0.486[b]	0.421[b]	0.187[b]	**0.874**[a]		
Relatedness needs satisfaction (RNS)	0.547[b]	0.647[b]	0.285[b]	0.317[b]	**0.920**[a]	
Customer–company identification (CCI)	−0.435[b]	−0.489[b]	−0.440[b]	−0.337[b]	−0.379[b]	**0.985**[a]
Cronbach's α	0.975	0.964	0.910	0.903	0.956	0.980

Abbreviation: CSR, corporate social responsibility.

[a]Square roots of the average variance extracted are shown (in bold) on the diagonal of the matrix, whereas the interconstruct correlations are shown off the diagonal.

[b]Significant at the 0.001 level.

TABLE 4 Alternative model comparison

Model	Factor loaded	χ^2/df	CFI	NFI	TLI	GFI	SRMR	RMSEA	AIC
1	6 factors: BP, SCBF, ANS, CNS, RNS, and CCI.	3.16	0.988	0.982	0.985	0.955	0.036	0.045	661.70
2	5 factors: BP/SCBF, ANS, CNS, RNS, and CCI.	23.15	0.869	0.864	0.845	0.744	0.195	0.145	4,205.47
3	4 factors: BP/SCBF, ANS, CNS, and RNS/CCI.	54.98	0.673	0.670	0.621	0.604	0.239	0.226	10,051.77
4	3 factors: BP/SCBF/ANS, CNS, and RNS/CCI.	63.80	0.614	0.610	0.559	0.547	0.271	0.244	11,832.51
5	2 factors: BP/SCBF/ANS and CNS/RNS/CCI.	73.99	0.546	0.543	0.488	0.492	0.351	0.263	14,120.88
6	1 factor: All variables combine	87.77	0.458	0.455	0.391	0.418	0.307	0.286	16,764.18

Abbreviations: AIC, Akaike information criterion; ANS, autonomy needs satisfaction; BP, brand passion; CCI, customer–company identification; CFI, comparative fit index; CNS, competence needs satisfaction; CSR, corporate social responsibility; GFI, goodness of fit index; NFI, normed fit index; RMSEA, root mean square error of approximation; RNS, relatedness needs satisfaction; SCBF, strategic CSR-brand fit; SRMR, standardized root mean squared residual; TLI, Tucker–Lewis Index; χ^2/df, Chi-square/degree of freedom.

TABLE 5 Results of the structural path model

H	Paths	Estimate	*t* Value	Decision
H1	SCBF → ANS	0.401***	14.241	Supported
H2	SCBF → CNS	0.400***	14.186	Supported
H3	SCBF → RNS	0.635***	26.742	Supported
H4	ANS → BP	0.339***	14.149	Supported
H5	CNS → BP	0.214***	8.933	Supported
H6	RNS → BP	0.384***	15.722	Supported

Abbreviations: ANS, autonomy needs satisfaction; BP, brand passion; CCI, customer–company identification; CNS, competence needs satisfaction; CSR, corporate social responsibility; RNS, relatedness needs satisfaction; SCBF, strategic CSR-brand fit.

***Significant at the 0.001 level.

4.8 | Moderating effect of customer-company identification

Following Hayes and Rockwood (2017), regression-based statistical moderation analysis was performed to examine the two-way interaction effect of CCI. We dichotomized CCI into high- and low-CCI situations by using a median split, then examined its interaction with strategic CSR-brand fit. The results of H7a, as shown in Table 6, suggest that CCI had no interaction effects on the influence of CSR-brand fit on autonomy needs satisfaction (H7a: $\beta = 0.029$, $t = 0.348$ *NS*), rejecting H7a. This finding indicates that CCI does not satisfy consumers' autonomy needs. Similarly, the interaction effects of CSR-brand fit and CCI on consumers' competence needs satisfaction (H7b: $\beta = 0.487$, $t = 5.293$***) and relatedness needs satisfaction (H7c: $\beta = 0.412$, $t = 5.607$***) were found statistically significant, supporting H7b and H7c. Our results for moderation analysis further show that consumers' competence needs satisfaction is strengthened more by CSR-brand fit when CCI is high ($\beta = 0.557$, $t = 9.487$***) but not when CCI is low ($\beta = 0.070$, $t = 0.994$ NS). Relatedness needs satisfaction is better captured by CSR-brand fit when CCI is high ($\beta = 0.857$, $t = 18.243$***) than for a low CCI ($\beta = 0.444$, $t = 7.489$***).

5 | GENERAL DISCUSSION

Drawing on CT, BPNT, and SIT, this study is the first to link the CSR–brand passion relationship by highlighting strategic CSR-brand fit as a new avenue for increasing brand passion among customers. Specifically, we contributed to add to the growing CSR and brand passion literature by examining the effects of strategic CSR-brand fit on brand passion under the theoretical grounds of CT. Second, we have contributed to explore whether customers' A-C-R needs satisfaction significantly mediating the influence of strategic CSR-brand fit on brand passion through the lens of BPNT. Finally, our study contributed to the consumer behavior literature by identifying

TABLE 6 Moderating effect of customer-company identification

Hypotheses	Path	Overall interaction effect (*t*-value)	Low customer–company identification (*t*-value)	High customer–company identification (*t*-value)
H7a	SCBF → ANS	0.029 (0.348) NS	0.361 (5.532)***	0.391 (7.212)***
H7b	SCBF → CNS	0.487 (5.293)***	0.070 (0.994) NS	0.557 (9.487)***
H7c	SCBF → RNS	0.412 (5.607)***	0.444 (7.849)***	0.847 (18.243)***

Abbreviations: ANS, autonomy needs satisfaction; CNS, competence needs satisfaction; NS, nonsignificance; RNS, relatedness needs satisfaction; SCBF, strategic CSR-brand fit.

***Significant at the 0.001 level.

a consumer-level moderator (e.g., CCI) of the relationship between CSR-brand fit and brand passion through the lens of SIT. Specifically, we contributed to further understanding of a key boundary condition to explain "when" and "how" CSR-brand fit captures brand passion formation.

As expected, results show that CSR-brand fit contributes significantly and positively in driving consumers' A-C-R needs satisfaction. This empirical finding indicated that consumers' A-C-R needs for the brand are likely to be satisfied when the telecom operators' CSR efforts are in line with its core brand image. Thus, it seems a prerequisite to have CSR-brand fit to experience customers' A-C-R satisfaction. These results lend support to the idea of BPNT (Gilal, Zhang, Paul, et al., 2019) which suggests that consumers' A-C-R can be satisfied by marketing programs of those brands which truly care about consumers and making them feel appreciated and competent.

Our findings further suggest that the strategic CSR-brand fit had the greatest effect on telecom customer's relatedness needs satisfaction than on autonomy and competence. This finding indicates that the differential effect of firms' CSR activities on need satisfaction may not equally influence customers' A-C-R needs satisfaction. This can be put down to the fact that customers may have different needs and the satisfaction with customer's relatedness is more preferred over autonomy and competence through CSR-brand fit activities. These findings are consistent with prior studies (Gilal, Zhang, Gilal, et al., 2019; Sweeney et al., 2014; Thomson, 2006) which revealed that satisfaction with relatedness needs through word-of-mouth messages originated from the company spokesperson is an important indicator of customers' behavioral intention.

Likewise, consistent with hypotheses, our data establish a promising influence of the consumers' A-C-R needs satisfaction in explaining consumers' passion toward brands. This finding demonstrated that experiencing A-C-R is related to improved brand passion. The careful path-by-path analysis also reveals that consumers' relatedness needs satisfaction had the greatest effect on their passion for the brand. This is an interesting finding which suggests that satisfaction with consumers' relatedness needs is an important source to capture brand passion. Thus, brand passion among consumers is likely to be strengthened more when CSR-brand fit fulfills relatedness needs. This can be true since consumers with a high need to belong often look to brands for meaning cues which may, in turn, help them to enhance their personal and social identification with brands (Gilal et al., 2020). These results support the findings of prior research which reported the strongest influence of relatedness needs satisfaction on consumer behavior outcomes such as wellbeing (Ahn, Back, & Boger, 2019), attachment with the human brand/celebrity (Thomson, 2006), attachment with a brand (Ahn & Back, 2019), and airline brand passion (Gilal et al., 2020).

Furthermore, we also tested the direct link from strategic CSR-brand fit to brand passion with mediators and without mediating variables. Our data establish that the additional path (strategic CSR-brand fit→ brand passion) is nonsignificant with mediating variables. When customers' A-C-R needs satisfaction was added in the model, the direct path from strategic CSR-brand fit to brand passion was statistically insignificant, thereby suggesting full mediation from the intermediate variables in the model. This finding suggested that experiencing A-C-R has explanatory relevance in the relationship between CSR-brand fit and customers' brand passion. Thus, the overall results show that satisfaction with customers' A-C-R is likely to be activated through firms' CSR-brand fit programs and that the satisfactions in firms' CSR-brand fit activities are strongly linked to brand passion formation. These results are consistent with prior studies which reported satisfaction with A-C-R through online customization experiences (Kim & Lee, 2020) and achievement-related elements (Bitrián et al., 2020) as important indicators of customers' behavioral intention such as autonomous motivation and customer happiness.

Finally, our moderation analysis reveals an insignificant interaction effect of strategic CSR-brand fit and CCI on customers' autonomy needs satisfaction. This finding indicates that CCI does not facilitate a sense of autonomy among customers. Moderation analysis further reveals that customers' competence needs satisfaction is strengthened more by CSR-brand fit when CCI is high but not when CCI is low. Customers' relatedness needs satisfaction is better captured by CSR-brand fit when CCI is high than for a low CCI. These results are in line with prior research which suggests that when customers highly identify with the firms, they strongly experience a sense of belongingness and competence from the firms' CSR initiatives (Hur et al., 2020; Yang et al., 2019).

6 | THEORETICAL CONTRIBUTIONS

This study significantly contributes to brand management research and offers several theoretical contributions. First, our study links strategic CSR-brand fit to brand passion among customers under the theoretical tenets of congruence theory (CT), which suggests that customers are more likely to integrate the company's CSR program into their cognitive structure when there is a good fit between a brand's CSR program and consumers' perceptions related to the company (Singh, 2016). On the basis of this CT proposition, our study reveals that CSR-brand fit significantly capture consumer brand passion when the influence of any intervening (e.g., mediating) variable is controlled. Thus, the present research contributed to support the theoretical notion of CL by suggesting that brand passion can be increased among customers through the firm's CSR-brand fit initiatives.

Second, this study establishes the authenticity of BPNT in CSR and brand management literature. BPNT posits the existence of A-C-R as basic needs and suggests that these needs are essential for flourishing and wellbeing (Vansteenkiste et al., 2020). BPNT further asserts that customers' A-C-R needs are influenced by the external marketing environment and that when these needs are supported/satisfied, they account for a broad variety of positive outcomes (Gilal, Zhang, Paul, et al., 2019; Jillapalli & Wilcox, 2010). In line with this theoretical paradigm, we studied customers' needs for A-C-R as

mediating variables to better understand the impact of strategic CSR-brand fit on the passion for the brand. Our study has revealed that experiencing A-C-R needs have explanatory relevance and that the satisfaction of these needs significantly contributes to increasing brand passion among consumers.

Third, to better understand the relationship between strategic CSR-brand fit and brand passion via A-C-R needs satisfaction, the intervening effect of CCI was examined through the lens of SIT. SIT posits that consumers will more likely to be identified with a firm that helps them build and keep their social identity (Turner & Tajfel, 1986) and that the greatest association between customers and brands are influenced by CCI (Yang et al., 2019). On the basis of this idea, our study contributes to supporting SIT by illuminating the importance of high CCI in influencing passion for brands through competence and relatedness needs satisfaction.

7 | CONTRIBUTIONS FOR PRACTICE

This study provides several important practical guidelines for globally located telecom service operators, in general, and the brand strategist of cellular service operators in Pakistan, in particular. Our study has established the importance of strategic CSR-brand fit as an important tool in strengthening brand passion among telecom customers in an emerging market. Particularly, this study provided a framework to explain how the strategic CSR-brand fit of a firm affected telecom customers' A-C-R needs satisfaction and, in turn, their passion for the telecom brand. These findings indicate that telecom companies should acutely choose high-fit CSR initiatives. For example, the telecommunication service operators would benefit more to support projects aimed at educating underprivileged rural people by offering a basic literacy curriculum using SMS and free connectivity for teachers and learners, rather than designing a campaign to help prevent AIDS/HIV infections. In a similar vein, telecom operators may fund the project toward the Pink Ribbon Day—known as the International Breast Cancer Awareness Day. In particular, telecom operators may participate in the global Pink Ribbon campaign by delivering awareness messages to customers using SMS and phone call services. Specifically, firms can benefit from helping customers connect with their family, friends, and loved ones on Pink Ribbon Day by providing free high-speed internet, free SMS, and airtime. In a similar vein, telecom operators may benefit more by providing millions of meals to peoples living in underprivileged areas in which they operate to combat the impacts of COVID-19. In line with these guidelines, telecom service operators seeking to improve the passion for their brands are encouraged to design above CSR-brand fit programs that fit the needs of customers or they may improve brand passion among telecom customers by engaging them in real below-the-line CSR programs. It is also important that the CSR-brand fit should be prioritized in CSR-brand fit advertising and other marketing activities.

Our study revealed that when including customers' A-C-R needs satisfaction in the model, the direct path from strategic CSR-brand fit to brand passion was insignificant, thereby suggesting that CSR-brand fit significantly influences brand passion formation through A-C-R needs satisfaction. This is an important finding which suggests that brand strategist of telecom service operators should pay special attention to fully support their customers' A-C-R needs through CSR-brand fit programs as these three needs deeply influence their passion for the telecom brand. This finding is also suggesting that when telecom customers' A-C-R needs satisfaction is not satisfied by CSR-brand fit programs and when there is a mismatch between CSR program and company/brand image, the use of CSR might not be thriving. Therefore, practitioners in the telecom industry seeking to increase passion for their telecom brands are encouraged to focus on these three key psychological needs and support them over time by designing CSR-brand fit programs that truly care about customers (relatedness satisfaction) which makes them feel appreciated (autonomy satisfaction), empowered, and competent (competence satisfaction). For instance, one way to support satisfaction with telecom customers' relatedness need through CSR-brand fit programs is to join the global Pink Ribbon campaign and deliver breast cancer awareness messages to customers through SMS and phone calls. This will increase the feelings of care and intimacy and promotes customers' competence. Likewise, it would also be fruitful to help customers connect with their family, friends, and loved ones on Pink Ribbon Day by providing free high-speed internet, free SMS, and airtime. This relatedness supportive environment will ultimately promote customers' feelings of belongingness and connectedness with the firm. Once the satisfaction with relatedness is supported by this firm's CSR-brand fit program, customers will more likely to develop a strong passion for the telecom brand as established in our findings.

Finally, our study is the first to investigate how CCI in CSR-brand fit influences the process of brand passion formation. We establish that high CCI increases the effect of CSR-brand fit on brand passion through competence and relatedness needs satisfaction. This understanding aids great value in the process of brand passion formation among telecom customers in emerging markets. Particularly, based on these findings, we suggest globally located tycoons in the telecommunication industry in general, and the brand strategist of telecom service operators in Pakistan, in particular, to use this framework to better understand telecom customers' behavior and establish marketing strategies appropriately to increase the higher level of CCI. One effective way of strengthening CCI could be to actively engage customers in the brand cocreation process, to encourage customers' participation in customer-centric CSR initiatives using the below-the-line technique, or effectively incorporate the need for self-enhancement and/or resonating campaigns into their advertising message strategies that mainly emphasizes CCI.

8 | LIMITATIONS AND RESEARCH AVENUES

As with all research, this paper has some limitations which point to directions for further research. First, we investigated the structural effect of strategic CSR-brand fit on brand passion using scenarios

from telecom service operators (e.g., Jazz, Zong, Ufone, and Telenor) that generally represented a good fit for the CSR actions. Further research is needed to validate our findings in the manufacturing domain (e.g., FMCG, fashion clothing, and restaurant), with significant variation in fit (Singh, 2016) and/or, if possible, compare and contrast the influence of positive versus negative CSR-brand fit and low versus high CSR-brand fit on brand passion via three psychological needs satisfaction with longitudinal or time-lagged data (Gong et al., 2021). Second, this study has the generalizability issue, as the data were collected from one country (e.g., Islamic Republic of Pakistan) and one industry (e.g., telecommunication service operators) only, therefore, may have cultural constraints (Kumar & Paul, 2018). Replication studies are needed with data from multiple countries to ensure the generalizability and external validity of our findings across different cultures with unique religious affiliations. Third, we studied the positive side of consumer-brand relationships by examining the effect of strategic CSR-brand fit on brand passion via telecom customers' A-C-R needs satisfaction, whereas, the negative side of consumer relationship has received fewer efforts from marketing scholars (Chang et al., 2019; Lafferty et al., 2016). Therefore, it is interesting to investigate whether perceived CSR-brand misfit (e.g., mismatch) influences brand avoidance or brand hate via customers' psychological needs frustration for A-C-R. Fourth, we tested the mediating effect of three basic psychological needs for A-C-R into the relationship between strategic CSR-brand fit and brand passion under the theoretical lens of BPNT. The authors and supporters of BPNT have recently introduced a new basic need-candidate in BPNT (Vansteenkiste et al., 2020). Therefore, an interesting avenue for further research could be to test the role of newly proposed basic needs for variety, morality, and novelty in increasing consumer brand passion. Another interesting avenue for further research could be to test what kind of motivational regulations (e.g., amotivation, external, introjected, identified, integrated, and intrinsic) are influenced by CSR-brand fit types and what motivational regulations are more prominent in capturing passion for masstige brands (Chen et al., 2018; Paul, 2015, 2018) among customers under the theoretical lens of organismic integration theory (Gilal et al., 2021). This gap should be addressed in future research. Finally, academic research by marketing scholars has revealed significant age and gender differences in consumer behavior and concluded that age and gender prominently influence customers' attitudes and behaviors. In line with these ideas, we invite consumer scholars to fill this gap by testing the three-way interaction effect of consumer age and gender into the relationship between CSR-brand fit and brand passion using moderated moderated-mediation methodology.

9 | CONCLUSION

The goal was to analyze the structural effect of strategic CSR-brand fit on telecom customers' brand passion using data from telecom customers. The extant literature in the marketing and brand management realm indicated brand-related variables such as brand personality, brand uniqueness, brand experience, and brand prestige, act as determinants of brand passion formation. We tested a full-fledged structural model consisting of strategic CSR-brand fit as an independent variable and A-C-R needs satisfaction and CCI as mediating and moderating variables respectively to capture telecom customers' brand passion in an emerging market. SEM results suggested the strongest positive effect of CSR-brand fit on telecom customers' brand passion via relatedness needs satisfaction followed by autonomy and competence needs satisfaction. Moreover, the moderating effect was statistically significant through competence and relatedness needs satisfaction for customers with high CCI but it was not significant through competence satisfaction for customers with low CCI. CCI trivially facilitates brand passion formation through autonomy needs satisfaction. On the basis of the above findings, we believe that our study has opened a new window of opportunities for marketing practitioners and provided a thoughtful discussion for academicians in terms of exciting new directions for further research.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The authors declare that there are no conflict of interests.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author.

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